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ABSTRACT

There is a plethora of information about the qualities and skills needed to be a good educational leader. The focus, however, is usually on what educational leaders "should do" rather than on what they "should not do." This paper presents findings of a study that identified the mistakes that school administrators, educational leaders, or supervisors most commonly make. A questionnaire asked 375 graduate students in educational leadership courses (who were educators in school settings) to list the mistakes that their administrators made. The students identified 15 categories of administrative mistakes. The most frequently mentioned category was poor human relations skills, followed by poor interpersonal communication skills, lack of vision, and avoidance of conflict. A conclusion is that administrators make many leadership errors that could be avoided. These mistakes appear to affect the entire school climate. One table is included. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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# MISTAKES EDUCATIONAL LEADERS MAKE

## Introduction

The literature is replete on what it takes to be a good educational leader. Further, state departments of education have mandated programs prescribing what is needed for certification as an educational leader. As a result, universities in each state develop training programs to meet these certification requirements. Crews and Weakley (1995) describe such training programs in 15 states. They maintain that leadership skills can be taught, but that traditional programs fall short of providing those skills. They believe that training programs that are likely to provide the skills should provide for goal-setting, coaching and mentoring, and long term informal interactive workshops where leaders learn by doing in a collegial relationship.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) have also developed a list of skills that administrators should possess to be effective leaders. The NAESP, for example, has identified 14 skills/areas. They are the following:

- Instructional leadership
- Instructional analysis and supervision
- Planning
- Communications
- Creativity
- Group leadership and Team Building
- Organizing
- Problem Solving
- Decisiveness
- Systems Analysis
- Vision
- Climate Development
- Moral Responsibility
- Knowledge Base

In addition to the states, universities, and national organizations there is a plethora of writers/scholars who have their own ideas concerning what educational leaders should be able to do or the type of training they should have (Bulach and Pickett, 1995; Hallinger and McCary, 1992; Hallinger, Leithwood, and Murphy, 1993; Hoyle, 1991; Lumsden, 1993; Murphy, 1992; Murphy, Joseph, and Hallinger, 1992; Patterson, 1993; Reitzug and Burrello, 1995; Schmuck, 1993). Bulach and Pickett for example describe twelve things successful educational leaders should do. Some of these are the following; develop good listening skills, learn to be humble, turn to peers for support, cultivate an atmosphere of trust, model the behavior you expect, etc. .

The point that is being made is that state departments and departments of educational leadership have courses and training programs that teach would be administrators the theory, knowledge, and skills that should enable them to function as educational leaders in school districts. National organizations and scholars in the field write about what educational leaders should do to be effective. The focus, however, is on what educational leaders **"should do"** rather than on mistakes or what they **"should not do."** We believe that avoiding mistakes are just as important. There is a need to know the types of mistakes supervisors make so they can be avoided as often as possible.

Knowing **"what not to do"** is just as important if not more important than knowing **"what to do."** This theory is based on the premise that the number of things a person should not do is much smaller than the things a person should do. Also it is based on the belief that the negative effect of one mistake is far greater than the effect of many positive things. It is commonly accepted that all the good a person does can be undone by one mistake.

Purpose of this study

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to identify those behaviors school administrators, educational leaders, or supervisors do that they "should not do." Three professors in the departments of educational leadership, middle grades, and secondary education devised the following process for getting at some administrator "should nots." They asked students in their graduate classes to list the mistakes their administrators made. These lists were consolidated into one list for each class. Using the nominal group technique, each class ranked the list of mistakes from the most significant to those not as serious. Data was collected from 23 classes of graduate students consisting of 375 students who were educators in a school setting. The rankings received from the 23 classes of graduate students identified 15 categories of mistakes/behaviors frequently made by their supervisors. These 15 mistakes again ranked using the nominal group technique.

## Results

The final ranking of mistakes consisted of categories of behaviors ranging from the most significant to those not as serious. That is all of the mistakes were considered as something administrators should not do, but the one ranked first was the one that caused the most problems. The one ranked fifteen caused less problems (see Table # 1 for the list of rankings).

The most frequently occurring behavior category was poor human relations skills. A lack of trust and an uncaring attitude were the two mistakes most frequently given for this behavior category. These two areas tend to go together. If a person perceives that the supervisor does not care, it follows that distrust will also occur. Afterall, why would you trust others when you perceive that they do not care about you? Other mistakes associated with caring and trust were failure to give warm fuzzies, failure to circulate with staff, staying

distant, not calling teachers by their names, failure to delegate, and failure to complement staff. Generally, administrators with this type of behavior have a very strong "task orientation" as opposed to a "people" orientation.

One final mistake in this category of behavior deals with inability to motivate staff. Teachers felt that many administrators do not know how to motivate staff except by position, reward and coercion power. Leaders who attempt to motivate with these forms of power tend to also be "task" oriented. This type of leader behavior is congruent with those mentioned above.

The next most frequently occurring mistake deals with a category of behavior labeled "poor interpersonal communication skills." The example most frequently given for this mistake was failure to listen. Doing paperwork and lack of eye contact were examples of behaviors given for failure to listen. It is interesting that a perceived failure to listen is often interpreted by the speaker that you do not care. Whereas a perception that you are listening shows that you care.

Another mistake associated with interpersonal communications deals with failure to give teachers feedback. Examples given were failure to give feedback regarding when they stopped in your room; how you handled the fight; how you handled the parent conference; and what type of discipline the student received who was sent to the office. A negative form of feedback is also associated with this type of behavior. For example, some supervisors will reprimand a teacher in front of other teachers instead of doing it privately. Just as it is a mistake for teachers to reprimand students in front of the whole class it is also a mistake for supervisors to reprimand teachers in front of other teachers.

Interpersonal communications and human relations are closely intertwined. Listening, caring, and trust goes hand in hand. Listening conveys a caring attitude, and caring is a building block for trust (Bulach, 1993). The ability to build trust is an essential human relations skill that greatly facilitates interpersonal communications. Little attention, however, is given to these two behavior categories in leadership preparation programs.

It should not come as a surprise that educational leaders are weak in these two areas. There is the evidence collected from 375 educators that these are the two areas where supervisors make the worst mistakes. There is also data from the National Association of Elementary School Principals' assessment centers. In the assessments conducted at the State University of West Georgia through the Administrator Diagnostic Center, these were the areas of greatest deficiency. In reviewing the curriculum in our administrator preparation program, we found very little that provided training in human relations or interpersonal relations. Consequently, a human relations seminar has been developed to address this deficiency in our training program. It was interesting that the work of Russell (1997) identified "Listening to Understand Clearly" and "Giving Feedback to Help Others" as the first two modules in their leadership training program for support personnel.

Closely related to interpersonal communications and human relations was the failure of some supervisors to project an image that shows some semblance of "ethics or character." This category of behavior was ranked number nine in the ranking. Behaviors mentioned for this category were the following: secretive about money from the coke machines, being out of the office without informing staff or worse yet being out sick and being seen at a social function during or later in the day; turning in requests for mileage money and riding to a conference with a principal from a neighboring school; failure to keep a confidence, gossiping about other teachers and administrators, and/or being promiscuous. According to Bulach (1993), certain behaviors associated with character such as truthfulness and honesty are key factors in the development of trust in human relations. In short, a poor image in the area of ethics and character will markedly change a supervisor's human relations and interpersonal communications.

The third category of behavior viewed as a mistake is called "a lack of vision." Examples of behaviors given for this category were failure to support teachers when influential parents were involved; reprimanding the whole staff instead of the person responsible; and keeping students inside for recess if there was a chance that mud would get tracked into the building. Basically, these behaviors are typical of principals who do not think about the overall impact/impression their decisions will have on staff and students. These behaviors also show a lack of vision regarding the importance of instruction and curriculum and their role in the total operation of the school. Teachers stated that these administrators rarely talk about these areas except when it is time to compare test scores.

Closely related to the lack of vision category are two other categories: "lack of knowledge about curriculum and instruction and "failure to lead." These two categories were both ranked fourth in the ranking process. It is a common complaint from students in our graduate classes that many administrators do not have a knowledge base in curriculum and instruction. Perhaps this is unique to Georgia where high school and coaching personnel are often promoted to principalships--some at the elementary level. They are seen as managers/administrators of the building with little knowledge of the instructional process or the curriculum being taught. Teachers view this as a serious mistake because they have to rely on someone else for leadership. It also follows that it is difficult to conceptualize a vision of your educational philosophy for the staff you are trying to lead. Consequently, this type of administrator becomes a manager and relies on supervisors from the county office, consultants, and occasionally on lead teachers for leadership in this crucial area.

The next mistake "avoiding conflict" embraces behaviors mentioned earlier, i.e., supporting influential parents, evaluations never have anything negative, and chastising the entire staff. Other behaviors mentioned were hiding in the office, and prefacing requests/demands with "the board wants" or "the superintendent wants" when they do not want to be blamed for something they are supposed to do. One other behavior was principals who always support their teachers even when they are wrong as a way of avoiding conflict with teachers. Teachers commented that they liked this behavior, but students and parents did not. It is important to note that "Resolving conflict moves us forward. Keeping

it under wraps holds us back" (Patterson, 1993, p.29).

Weaknesses in this area were also identified in NAESP assessments at the Administrator Diagnostic Center. A review of our curriculum revealed that there is very little training given to helping supervisors deal with conflict. Consequently, a ten-hour seminar has been developed to provide future and current administrators with training in dealing with conflicts. The seminar is experiential in nature and allows them to practice behaviors for dealing with conflict.

Supervisors who "forget what it is like to be a teacher" are also making a serious mistake. Paperwork, committee assignments, after school duties, and failure to tell teachers about the history of students before assigning them to their classrooms were behaviors mentioned in this category. Interruptions for assemblies, testing, pictures, sales promotions and other events involving students were also mentioned. Closely related was the last mistake in the ranking "interruptions through use of the public address system." Teachers reported that there would be fewer interruptions if administrators knew what it was like to have the instructional process interrupted as often as it is.

Supervisors who overemphasize control are also making a serious mistake according to our graduate students. Examples of behaviors mentioned for this type of administrator are the following: failure to delegate; top down administration, failure to accept committee decisions when they differ from the supervisors; failure to involve staff in assigning students and teachers to classes. One other behavior associated with a high need to control is use of the words "I" and "my" as in "my school" or "my staff." Great leaders use the word "I" in their vocabulary only when necessary. For example, President Reagan is noted for his sparing use of the word "I."

Closely, aligned with this controlling behavior was "favoritism" which was # 12 in the ranking. Administrators with high needs in this area tend to have an "in group" "pets" or "confidants." In order to meet there need to know what is going on and control it, they use certain members of their staff. In return they reward them with extras, special assignments, let them leave early, come late, or as some students stated, "allow some to get away with murder.". Those who are not on the inside view this type of administrator with fear and extreme dislike.

Somewhat related to this category is the eleventh ranked category identified as "inconsistent." Most of the behaviors identified dealt with the way supervisors carried out the policies and procedures of the school district. The way they were applied was very inconsistent depending on who was affected. For example, some students received different punishments for the same offense, some teachers were allowed to bend the rules, some parents received privileges, etc. . Other inconsistencies dealt with a behavior that would be tolerated for months and then the faculty was told to "get tough." Examples of this were use of hall passes, bathroom privileges, and lunchroom and playground procedures.

A mistake not mentioned frequently, but considered serious was "not following through or holding people accountable." Students commented that it did not happen often, but teachers were usually aware when administrators made it. The examples given were typically of administrators who told staff what was expected in faculty meetings. This would be enforced for a short period and then it would be forgotten or in some cases not enforced at all. Faculty tended to interpret this leadership style as "this to shall pass." "Let's play the game and placate him/her." Other examples dealt with administrator/teacher conferences where the supervisor told the teacher what s/he expected and then never followed up to see if the teacher did it.

One mistake that occurred frequently, and interpreted as somewhat serious was "snap judgments." The examples given dealt with supervisors who only listen to one side of the story before making a decision. Typical of this type of behavior would be a teacher who would be called to the office based on a phone call from a parent or central office official and chastised for something that happened. Teachers felt that they were judged before both sides of the situation were known. As one graduate student put it "they want to know why you did what you did before they even ask you to tell them what you did." Other not so personal examples of this kind of behavior dealt with supervisors who want to implement the latest fad based on a conference they attended.

As we reflect on the data that we received, we agree that the above represent a number of mistakes that supervisors make. We also agree that the areas of human relations and interpersonal relations are critical areas in which supervisors make many mistakes. Educational training institutions for educational leaders must revamp their programs to address curriculum deficiencies in these areas. We are also in agreement with the third and fourth areas, i.e., lack of vision and conflict avoidance. The assessments we have done on current and future leaders through the Administrator Diagnostic Center indicate the same areas of weakness in their training. One category of behavior for mistakes that was not mentioned by the graduate students deals with group leadership. Based on our observations and again on the results of assessments through the Administrator Diagnostic Center we believe that supervisors make many mistakes in providing leadership for groups. They do not deal with a disruptive group member, use the wrong leadership style, stifle conflict, do not assign group roles, do not use appropriate problem solving processes, and do not understand stages of group development and group process.

## Conclusions

The feedback received from the students in collecting this data sends a clear message that school administrators are making many mistakes that could easily be avoided, if they were aware of them. Also, there was a strong indication that the overall climate of a school is influenced by the number of mistakes an administrator makes. As stated by Patterson (1993), "We need to learn from the pain and pitfalls encountered on the road to success." (p.36) We hope that we have paved the way for supervisors to avoid some of the pain and pitfalls on their road to success.

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Table # 1. Ranking of supervisory behaviors that are viewed by teachers as mistakes.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Ineffective human relations |
| 2. | Ineffective interpersonal communications |
| 3. | A lack of vision |
| 4. | Avoid conflict |
| 4. | Failure to lead |
| 4. | Avoidance of conflict |
| 4. | Lack of knowledge about instruction/curriculum |
| 8. | Control oriented |
| 9. | Lack of ethics/character |
| 10. | Forget what it is like to be a teacher |
| 11. | Inconsistent |
| 12. | Shows favoritism |
| 13. | Staff is not held accountable/fail to follow through |
| 14. | Snap judgments |
| 15. | Public address (PA) system interruptions |